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A Feminist Critique: Using Friendship Ethnography to Explore the Experiences of  
Menstruation in the South Asian diaspora

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## Critique: Using Friendship Ethnography to Explore the Experiences of Menstruation in the South Asian diaspora

### ABSTRACT

Whilst menstruation discourse is one that is saturated with taboo and has implications on women universally, research documenting the experiences of menstruation within South Asian women is lacking. This is peculiar, considering the taboos menstruating South Asian women have had to face on the basis of Indian culture and the negative impact of such taboo on the wellbeing of women. Research failing to acknowledge the culture and the manifestation of issues South Asian women face in relation to menstrual taboos, means that feminist principles are not represented and the scope for informing practical interventions for such women, narrows. 6 women of the diaspora, aged between 20 and 24 were studied to explore the construction of menstruation experience in relation to taboo. Through semi-structured interviewing, the transmission, manifestation and consequences of menstrual taboos were explored. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was utilised, generating themes of: the mother as central to menstruation experience, objectification of the female body and protection of men. The core findings of the mother's powerful but negative attitudes and young South Asian men's lack of menstruation awareness, shed light on possible research into interventions that provide South Asian men and women with appropriate menstrual knowledge.

KEY WORDS	MENSTRUATION	DIAPSORA	TABOO	INTERPATIVE	ASIAN

## Introduction

According to Reece & Barbieri (2010, cited in Brantelid, 2014), for those who are biologically female and with functioning reproductive systems, menstruation is an event which will be experienced from the age of around 13, till the onset of the menopause at approximately age 52. Due to menstruation being a biologically rooted event in women, taboo that exists will be widespread. According to Goffman (1963), central to the concept of taboo, is the notion that the body or essence of an individual, becomes tarnished. One of the features of which taboo has been characterised by is the 'spoiling' of the body as a natural form. In a menstruation context, it can be seen how women have had to face the burden of menstrual blood being synonymous with lack of hygiene, dirt and disgust.

Walton (2013) stated that the act of menstruating being regarded as dirty and abnormal, is a theme that is prevalent across many cultural traditions. The discourse surrounding menstruation therefore, is one that is saturated with the notion of impurity and filth and this is universal.

There are several explanations for the existence of menstruation taboo. According to Hausman (2003), there is an air of mystery amongst men that surrounds menstrual blood which consequently, gives rise to false beliefs such as having the ability to contaminate. Furthermore, Bramwell (2000) explored the perceptions of various bodily fluids, finding that menstrual blood is a liquid that is off-putting and should be avoided. Other liquids such as breast milk were not found to be as unpleasant. These findings reiterate the universal notion of pollution theory (Britton, 1996) where menstrual blood renders women toxic and impure. According to Bettelheim (1954, cited in Montgomery, 1974) men's negative attitudes towards menstruating women are rooted in "vagina envy" where men are jealous of the reproductive abilities of women. Menstruation taboo is said to be the manifestation of hostility, derived from envy and not feeling part of the important process of conception. It can be seen how the discourse of taboo is patriarchal in nature (Bettelheim, 1954).

The manifestation of menstruation taboo in society has been evidenced through advertising. Johnston-Robleldo et al., (2006), studied press articles advocating menstrual suppression. It was concluded that menstruation suppression (by taking oral contraceptives) extended away from the purpose of health reasons as healthy women were also targeted to suppress their menstruation without valid reason. Menstruation marketing has created a culture of men presenting the ideal feminine woman as she who chooses to not menstruate, thus contributing to negative connotations of menstruation ( Johnston-Robleldo and Chrisler, 2013). Furthermore, advertisements perpetuate the notion that menstruation is dirty and that women should keep their 'tainted' selves under control and hidden. Advertising plays a role in 'reiterating and reinforcing the stereotypical and traditional viewpoint that menstrual blood is unclean.'(Newton, 2016:172). This is reinforced by the consistent

theme of maintaining secrecy within menstrual product advertising ( Erchull et al., 2002).

Attitudes towards menstruation and the experience of it are inextricably linked. Aflaq and Jami (2012) found that positive menstruation attitudes within women led to positive reporting of experiences. According to Ericksen (1987, cited in Walton

2013), menstruation taboo is a powerful device that intentionally aims to affect the dignity and autonomy of women. Research (Ussher, 2006; Young, 2005) have drawn on the Foucauldian concept of self-monitoring to explain how the stereotypical image of the feminine (ideal) women, acts as a major source of oppression for

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menstruating women. Foucault (1979) proposed that women are consistently pressured to be in a critical process of self-surveillance in order to live up to standards of femininity. The act of staining being presented as a 'crisis of hygiene' (Beauvoir, 1949), and menstruation resulting in women exhibiting traits that are stereotypically male such as anger and aggression (on account of hormonal changes), means that menstruation exposure would result in shame from deviating away from the revered, feminine image (Young, 2005).

The manifestation and consequences of patriarchal attitudes and self-monitoring has been evidenced. Brantelid et al., (2014) studied Swedish women who reported feelings of anxiety in relation to potentially 'leaking' blood in public. Furthermore, women tend to abstain from sex and sport to avoid embarrassment and maintain a 'squeaky clean' image (Brantelid et al., 2014). Jackson et al., (2003), observed how young women reported becoming stressed due to having to strategically conceal menstruation in public in an effort to avoid feeling 'exposed'. A vast amount of research (Jackson et al., 2003; Uskul, 2004), has documented women's need to disclose menstruation from males. Menstruation being a subject dominated with negative discourses of pollution a synonymous with violations of femininity, results in women feeling undignified, embarrassed and powerless (Tangney, 1995).

Third wave feminist ideology is particularly relevant to menstruation empowerment (Bobel, 2010). This is because within the theoretical third wave of feminism, there is an emphasis on intersectionality. Intersectionality was first discussed by scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to express her concern over the failure of feminist to account for the experiences of black women.

Embedded within intersectionality, is the acknowledgment that lived experience is intertwined with ethnicity (Bowleg, 2012). Bowleg (2012:2) stated:

yet despite a plethora of research focused on these populations, public health studies that reflect intersectionality in their theoretical frameworks, designs, analyses, or interpretations are rare.

As stated by White (2013), culture, class and ethnicity intertwines, affecting the way in which taboo is experienced however, European and American women dominate the study of menstruation. Furthermore, third wave feminism advocates for the female body and bodily functions to be a source of pride for all women in order to gain empowerment within their culture despite patriarchal attitudes (Bobel, 2010; Man and Huffman; 2005).

It is apparent that psychological research does not represent the ideology of intersectionality within third wave feminism. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) emphasised that whilst menstruation discourse is generally saturated with the notion of dirt and toxicity, researchers need to acknowledge that the origins and manifestation of taboos are inextricably linked with culture and therefore ethnicity. SA women will be subjected to their culturally specific taboos (Walton, 2013) and therefore their wellbeing will be affected in different ways, compared with non-Indian women. The taboo that SA women have had to experience makes them a marginalised group and therefore, an important demographic to target.

The importance of studying South Asian women in relation to menstruation, can be highlighted by the disparity in the reasons for why women conceal their menstruation. For example, a great deal of research has demonstrated women needing to conceal their menstruation in order to avoid appearing impure and dirty

(Merskin, 1999; Uskul 2004; Brantelid et al; 2014.) Whilst the Foucauldian idea of self-monitoring (Focault, 1979) has been attributed to this, the very few researchers (Singh; 2006;Thakur,2014) that have studied South Asian women, observed that the reason for South Asian women concealing menstruation, can be attributed to the cultural belief of 'the evil eye'. The concept of the evil eye refers to the notion that menstruation is an act of black magic and therefore should be concealed in order to prevent others from being cursed (Singh 2006). SA women were not driven by a need to appear feminine but rather, to prevent themselves from being lambasted due to supposedly cursing others. Furthermore Kumar and Srivastava (2011) reported that women in rural India would apply mud to sanitary towels in order to remove "black magic."

The repercussions of the 'evil eye' also extends to interfering with the autonomy of SA women. Research has shown (Garg et al., 2001; Bhatt, 2006; Singh, 2006) how menstruating SA women have been shunned away from places of worship and the kitchen due to fears of "cross contamination". A culture of 'untouchability' within SA women is highlighted, which is not something that has been reported in research making use of women growing up within Western Culture.

The culture surrounding menstruation for South Asian women appears to be saturated with false beliefs, consequently impacting on the integrity and autonomy of women (e.g. evil eye). Garg (2011) found that some women were forbidden to touch a cow (sacred animal in India) because doing so will render it infertile, reinforcing untouchability. Kumar and Srivastava, (2011) found that some believed the menstruating body releases chemicals which spoils food.

Menstruation tends to be discussed amongst mothers and daughters (Rembeck and Hermansson, 2008; Ali and Rizvi, 2009; Kissling, 1996). The extent of preparation and knowledge of menstruation has also been shown to correlate with positive experiences of menstruating (Marvan et al., 2005). This may be due to education, preventing young women from internalising negative menstrual discourse (Fingerson, 2005).

On the contrary, Katherine and Hoerster (2003, cited in Aflaq and Jami, 2012), compared the experiences and attitudes of Indian and American women and found a negative correlation between knowledge and positive experience within Indian women. The importance of the mother-daughter relationship, coupled with research showing that less prepared SA women have positive experiences raises the question

– Is menstruation taboo passed intergenerationally between mothers and daughters within Indian families?

It is important to note that menstruation research that has made use of SA women, is saturated with those who grew up in rural parts of India and therefore Indian culture alone. To the researchers knowledge, research has not documented the experiences of menstrual taboo within South Asian women living in the UK. Merskin (1999) stated that female family members may be responsible for passing menstrual misconceptions. In the current study, participants being the daughters of first generation immigrant mothers (who would have been exposed to menstruation taboo in India), allowed for the exploration of intergenerational transmission. The extent to which menstruation taboo is experienced within the SA diaspora was therefore of interest.



The small amount of research in relation to South Asian women and menstruation, is quantitative in nature. There is also a lack of ethnographic research (Thakur, 2014) within the field of menstruation. The current study acknowledged that direct perceptions of the SA diaspora are integral in exploring menstruation experience and how young women are affected by it. The purpose of the present research was to explore menstruation taboo within the context of British Asian culture. Inspired by existing gaps in research investigative questions were as follows:

Is menstruation taboo transmitted intergenerationally?

How do Asian women living in the UK construct their menstruation experience in relation to menstrual taboo?

How does menstruation taboo have an effect on the wellbeing of the women?

It was hoped that IPA would enable a thorough exploration of factors contributing toward menstrual experience in order for light to be shed on the way in which menstrual experience could be improved.

### **Philosophy of methodology**

Women have shared experiences of menstruation due to it being underpinned by taboo within South Asian culture (Bhatt and Bhatt, 2005). Menstruation experience is therefore rooted in cultural, social and historical contexts (Amos, 2016). Furthermore, as stated by Lin (2013:470) 'phenomenology is powerful when the study goal is to explore a concept loaded with social and cultural meanings.' IPA can be seen as complimentary to studying taboo.

IPA was utilised because of being concerned with interpretations of individuals within their lifeworld, as opposed to merely description (Reiners, 2012). Furthermore,

hermeneutics within IPA, means the appreciation of the personal insight of the researcher being an effective tool in interpreting experience (Fade, 2004). The researcher's perspective can be used as a tool to facilitate IPA research (Cassidy et al., 2011). The fact that the researcher has experienced menstrual taboo within SA culture, means that the use of IPA was particularly appropriate.

The emphasis on studying cultural taboo within menstruation experience, works hand in hand with a social constructionist epistemological stance. Social constructionism maintains that the nature of reality is dependent on interactions within individuals (Gray, 2004). The nature of menstruation experience in SA

women, can be seen to be rooted in the negative within the South Asian community. Meaning and experience being a product of social exchanges, means that realities are situated in a specific cultural context and time frame (Owen, 1995). This is compatible with the notion of menstrual taboo, due to its cultural specific nature and being a product of social exchanges. The constructionist epistemological stance, coupled with the IPA perspective, enabled for cultural and social aspects embedded within menstruation experience to have been unpacked, whilst lived experience was explored.

## **Participants**

Opportunity sampling was used where six, regularly menstruating South Asian friends of the researcher were interviewed. The women were daughters of second generation immigrant mothers who had emigrated from India to the UK before their children were born. This enabled for the exploration of intergenerational transmission of taboo. The women were friends with the researcher for at least three years. Three

years was judged to be an adequate length of time to have established a strong friendship.

The basis of friendship as an ethnographic method was integral for the study due to the abundance of research (Kissling, 1996; Water Aid, 2009) showing menstruation as a topic often discussed amongst friends. Jackson (2013) noted how the discussion of menstruation amongst friends, created a sense of solidarity and promoted honest discussions. According to Ellis (2007, cited in Owton, 2016) 'friendship as a method serves as 'a level of investment where researcher and friendship roles weave together, expand and deepen each other.' The rapport between the participants and researcher was used to facilitate gathering of sensitive data which stays true to the research aims.

**Table 1***Table showing demographic of participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Origin of mother within Punjab</b>	<b>Interview Duration in minutes</b>
A	20	Patiala	54
B	23	Karachi	44
C	21	Bengal	60
D	21	Gujarat	43
E	21	Lahore	52
F	24	<i>Patiala</i>	48

*\*Letters have been used for anonymity purposes*

Invitation (appendix 2 ) and Information sheets (appendix 3) were emailed to prospective participants. Once time was given for consideration and participants confirmed to participating (via word of mouth), consent forms (appendix 4) were emailed. Interviews were then arranged via the researcher's university email.

Interviews were conducted in private environments where participants reported feeling the most comfortable to facilitate the gathering of sensitive information. Interviews varied between 43 – 60 minutes, recorded using a Dictaphone and encrypted and stored on a password protected laptop.

Introductory questions served to provide context (appendix 6). For example: 'although I'm looking at menstruation in an academic context, it's something that we

have talked about before over the years. How are you feeling about it?.' Taboo being a sensitive subject meant that introductory questions served to 'ease in' participants in discussing sensitive information as Leech (2002) stated that questions generating sensitive information should be asked in the latter duration of the interview. Following the interview, participants were debriefed (appendix 5) and had the opportunity to raise concerns. Interviews were transcribed, and data was permanently deleted as promised on the information sheet.

The semi-structured interviewing method was deemed most appropriate as Ponterotto (2005) stated that semi-structured interviewing can act as an effective tool to empower marginalised groups. Within qualitative research, the causes for behaviour and emotions are not focus on but rather, an inductive approach is taken where themes and meanings are extrapolated and interpreted from broad personal experience (Willig 2008). The flexible, open ended and idiographic nature of the questions within the interview, enabled an inductive approach where participants could reflect and elaborate.

Whilst there is evidence for focus groups being ideal to obtain personal and sensitive information (Oliveira, 2011) the merits of friendship as a method (practically speaking) could not be benefitted from by using a focus group. It was believed that friendship ethnography, facilitated via one to one interviewing, would be as effective as a focus group context. The context of friendship resulted in ethical implications however these are discussed elsewhere in the dissertation.

## **Analysis**

IPA and exploration of taboo, work hand in hand. This is because the essence of IPA is the understanding of experience being intertwined with the attitudes, culture, history and relationships with others (Eatough and Smith, 2008) which are central to the concept of taboo. Overarching themes, reflecting the way in which menstruation experience was constructed, were extrapolated using the IPA framework provided by Larkin et al., (2012).

Transcripts were repeatedly read to aid familiarisation. Free coding took place where initial ideas about potential themes, metaphors and imagery were noted on the sides

of the transcript, serving as a prerequisite for the second stage - core analysis. Core analysis consisted of pairing meaningful participant factors (such as relationships) with identifying a deeper, experiential meaning underlying it (such as disempowerment). Core analysis served as interpretations of data. Experiential meanings of objects of contributed to emerging themes. The relationships between themes were found on an individual case basis and then on a crosses-sectional basis. All 6 transcripts were analysed for common master themes in accordance with the research aims.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was granted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's guidelines for code of ethics and conduct, via Manchester Metropolitan University's application for ethical approval (appendix 1). Deception was not involved. Informed consent was ensured and the information sheet and which clearly stating study aims. Lee (1993) stated that issues that are stressful and private (e.g. menstruation) will result in having to employ safeguards to prevent the sensitivity of participants becoming an ethical issue. Three safeguards as outlined by McCosker and Gerber (2011) were utilised. These were: maintaining rapport, the use of clearly presented aims of the study, and the provision of psychological support (through signposting of counselling services).

The use of friendship as a method posed extra considerations in terms of confidentiality and anonymity. Safeguards were put into place such as the generation of pseudonyms, encryption and password protection of verbatim transcripts to maximise anonymity and transparency of data. The consent form clearly stated that

anonymity of data was not guaranteed but identity exposure was unlikely. It was emphasised that interview data would not be shared with other participants.

Upon interview completion, participants were debriefed on how their data would be used. Opportunities to raise concerns was also provided. The debrief signposted participants to wellbeing services in the unlikely event of being negatively impacted on by the interview.

## **Results and Discussion**

Themes represented similar experiences of menstruation within the confines of taboo amongst British SA women. The Master themes consisted of: the role of the mother, objectification and protection of men.

### **The role of the mother as central to negative menstrual experience**

As stated by Cassidy et al., (2011) phenomenologically, speaking experience is bound in a world of relationships and analysis saw that negatively constructed menstruation experience is largely attributed to the mother within the mother daughter relationship. This is consistent with Sooki et al., (2016) who found that upon analysis of young girls in various countries, in 56% of cases, the mother dominated menstrual and puberty knowledge.

In the present study, the mother appeared to dominate the menstrual lives of women in two senses: being the source of menstrual related knowledge, and enforcing practices/protocols to be followed during menstruation in according with cultural attitudes. In terms of mothers being the source of taboo participants stated:

***My mum never really spoke about this period topic before. I wasn't sure who to tell. I was scared of their reaction. Like what am I going to do***

*because they never told me. Eventually I told my sister and my mum and my mum came up with all these things that I'm supposed to be doing when I'm on my period like don't to this don't do that. Sit like this. Don't change your clothing too often. Like oh my god*

*(Participant A, 57*

*– 61 )*

*Erm, Knowledge wise, I didn't get any information from anyone else. Everything period related I knew was from mum. We aren't even speaking about proper stuff like it's just a natural part of life or whatever. I was shown the special cupboard where the pads are kept, and got handed one, told to make sure I always place it properly to prevent leaks. Because god forbid of course anyone else finds out I'm on it (Participant B, 23 - 27)*

*We learnt a bit in school didn't we? Although I wouldn't even count that shitty class as learning about periods because you lit[erally] just find out about what happens on the biological side kind of a problem for Asian kids with strict parents because you know, we've spoken before about leaning next no nothing about the emotional side. Obviously, because its seen as an embarrassing subject, our dads aren't going to teach us. My mum has only ever shown me how to clean myself up and wear a pad properly out of fear that I don't keep it hidden. (Participant A, 74 - 80 )*

Menstruation related knowledge originated predominantly from the mother and that knowledge was manifested as negative discourse (and therefore taboo). Mendlinger et al., (2005) stated that the knowledge passed down between mother and daughter, contributes towards wellbeing however, the knowledge exchange between mother and daughter was being saturated with negativity, meant the opposite was seen.

Sadness and frustration in relation to this was expressed.

*It's crap. What is the point. I know she's my mum and stuff but you can't really expect kids who are growing up in Britain, to get*

***how to deal with periods based on outdated traditions or whatever (Participant F, 48-51 )***

**It like a feeling of lost. When mum tells me stuff like ‘oh, make sure you don’t hear your dad unwrapping the towel from the paper.’ It’s just ridiculous, sure, but I still do it. It gets to the point where I can’t bleed without feeling dehumanised Obviously like, I don’t agree with having to hide periods from everyone, particularly men but I just do it because It’s all I’ve ever heard. Sort of guilty otherwise (Participant A, 46 - 50)**

**Ha, I can’t even deal with telling my mum when I’m on my period. Same old reminders of having to clean extra and making sure no signs are left in the bathroom. It’s literally one of the most natural things in the world but I’m made to feel like it’s some sort of cursed, unwanted extension of me (Participant E, 33-38)**

Negative menstrual attitudes translated into negative experience, mirroring Aflaq and Jami (2012) research. Menstrual taboo and misconception on part of the mother during communication (regarding menstruation) is central to the creation of menstrual shaming culture (Mouli and Patel, 2017) and this was clearly reflected in the transcripts.

Interestingly, many participants shared the need to comply with the practices and protocols enforced by the mother, despite disagreements in cultural attitudes. One participant described the mother as a source ‘consistent negativity’ during menses and a source of conflict.

***Our views on menstruation and what and how others should be told about is something we completely disagree on. I don’t really tell her when I’m on and I make sure I buy my own pads and not keep them in the bathroom bin just so she doesn’t say anything. It’s not nice feeling not lady like or pure when I’m bleeding and I know that she’ll just remind me of all that stuff again in convo. I’d just insist on arguing. Just leave it out (Participant E, 54-60)***



Despite differences in cultural attitudes surrounding menstruation, the mother was an authoritative figure and the participants felt obliged to adhere to specific protocols.

This is consistent with Bejanyan et al., (2015) who stated that respect for parental authority is more so a norm within collectivist (South Asian) cultures.

The importance of the immigrant mother and British child dynamic was another concept emerging in relation to the mother as central in menstruation experience. Mendlinger et al., (2005), in one study, found that immigration status and cultural attitudes between mother and child, were at the centre of passing down of menstrual related knowledge. This was also echoed in the current research in terms of the Indian immigrant mother, and British daughter dynamic and appeared to be at the core of the transmission of menstrual taboo.

The differences in cultural values between immigrant parents and children, has been conceptualised as an acculturation gap. As stated by Birman (2011) refers to the different expectations of behaviour on part of the parent's in relation to the child due to difference in cultural climate experienced by the parents. The unwillingness to accept the attitudes of an immigrant parent can be a major source of conflict (Foner et al., 2011).

***To be honest, it's always in the back of my mind. I know she never tells me stuff in malice and I get that it's just her way of thinking about stuff. For example, I've been told since I was little not to go into the Gurdwara whilst bleeding and I've always abided by that. It's a tug of war where she wins if you get me (Participant D, 117 - 121)***

***Don't stain, you have to sit like this so you don't dirty anything. Mum's like oh make sure you have the darker bedsheet and not war white and I'm like mum ive, had enough of this (Participant F, 60-63)***

The phrase 'tug of war' appears to encapsulate the acculturation gap issue. Despite conflict of cultural attitudes on how menstruation should be viewed, participants

reported conforming to the mother's teachings and protocols regarding menstruation

– perhaps being attributed to the collectivist/authoritarian culture (Bejanyan et al., 2015 **Objectification of the female body**)

In the context of menstruation, research has found the need for women to conceal their menses (Beverly and Ingrid, 1988; Mandziuk, 2010; Malefyt, 2016). This was clearly reflected in the transcript.

(In the context of menstrual staining) **My mum was horrified and was like, make sure you wear dark clothes all the time when you're on your period ( Participant D, 201-202)**

***I feel like I'm not able to talk about it freely as I should be able to. Erm. It's not really mentioned in front of men. It's quite a taboo subject. It's quite controversial. People get kind of grossed out about as it's stigmatised it. Like it's kind of gross and what not. I think it's really unfair (Participant F, Lines 24-27 )***

IPA saw how there was a heavy element of objectification in relation to menstruation. Objectification refers to women evaluating themselves in accordance to societal standards (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Roberts and Waters (2004) conceptualised menstrual objectification as a third lens in which women view and change their bodies. In terms of this third lens, whilst advertising and media perpetuates the notion that women's need to be secretive regarding menses (Beverly and Ingrid, 1988; Mandziuk, 2010; Malefyt, 2016) because of being an unfeminine hygiene issue, when exploring culture and religious background however, the need to conceal, extends beyond societal norms and is intertwined with religious beliefs and religious purity.

*You can't pray or visit the mosque, because you aren't clean. It's important that you follow the rules and you aren't even supposed to touch the ground when you're on your period (Participant C, 330 - 333)*

*In Islam it's pretty clear, you can't touch the Koran because you aren't considered pure which I wish wasn't the case but it means something so I go with it (Participant A, 518-519)*

Participant A disagreed with religious beliefs regarding menses rendering women impure and unable to pray however out of a sense of religious loyalty, participant A like the other four Muslim participants, adhered to religious rules. Sveinsdóttir (2017) stated that a culture of shame is created when it is believed that some activities for menstruating women are out of bounds.

Menstruation being a barrier to worship was also mirrored in the experiences of the two Hindu participants, what with being menstrual blood being considered toxic. This was therefore consistent with pollution theory (Britton, 1996) as mentioned earlier. When further quizzed on the way in which religious attitudes have an effect, the inextricable link between objectification and religion was demonstrated:

***It's sort of inseparable. As a Muslim, I know it's hammered into me how I won't be able to go mosque because my blood doesn't make me holier than thou. It gets to you and it's makes me sad. If I want to be a good Muslim, I have to appreciate that there's a good reason and it's true that I'm not worthy of Allah's love when I am [menstruating] (Participant A 530-534)***

***I love being Muslim don't get me wrong but it's difficult to comprehend what is said about periods as someone living in this country. When I'm with my family or it's Ramadan, I don't feel free to say sod I can actually pray because blood is fine. Islam saying it's not. It ties you down (Participant B, 862 -866)***

***Well obviously, it makes you feel like shit knowing that you're have to casted out for the sake of bleeding. It's okay for men not to not have that (Participant C, 84 -86)***

The women appeared to have internalised religious beliefs of menstruation equating to impurity with participant A stating being unworthy of Allah's love. It is apparent that the rhetoric of menstruation and religious purity has an objectifying affect where these beliefs act as a metaphorical cloud, making SA menstruation women of faith feel bad about themselves. In further support of this, Bhartiya (2013) stated that only in Sikhism is there no menstruation related rules. Two Sikh participants empathised

their feelings of negatively when menstruating were rooted in culture and the attitudes of aunties as well as mothers.

***I'm not sure that the Guru Granth Sahib says anything about periods as I've never heard but my mum still advises me not to go gurdwara and stuff (Participant E, 512- 513)***

***You know how it is, Nazar Lagna. That's what mum says. I remember on New years wanting to go the gurdwara but mum was dead against it. She felt weird and it made me feel weird. Its dehumanising to made to feel like you can't enter gods house because your body isn't in a good enough state (Participant A, 871- 875)***

The phrase, 'Nazar lagna', meaning 'evil eye', was mentioned by both Sikh participants. This is consistent with research (Singh, 2006; Thakur, 2014) where menstruating women within SA communities were believed to have the ability to curse. Religious and cultural purity created a culture of objectification where women felt that they needed to adhere to rules and conceal their menstruation which subsequently, created feelings of shame and disgust.

### **Protection against men**

=The need for women to conceal their menstruation in the confines of taboo, appeared to be heightened in the context of being in contact with men. Participants expressed their annoyance.

***grew up with two brothers and it has been very like difficult as a 13 year old understanding why I can't tell them something about my period. Its just really difficult to try and find excuses around it when you can just be very straight forward and honest but I think we have just been brought up to feel like that and changing that viewpoint would be difficult now that we are so much older (Participant D, 764 -769)***

***My mum's very much like, you can never let your dad and brother get a sign that you're on your period which is why I have to do shit like making sure I cover sanitary pads with newspaper or. I've done it where I've left the paper on the sticky bit on the floor somewhere and my mum went after me saying you left the paper on the floor. I was like oh my god mum its okay (Participant B, 105 – 110)***

Responses are consistent with Bhartiya (2013) who found that 62% of a sample of 250 girls in India, reported avoiding the topic with men. Participants explained a need for creating excuses for not being able to pray during Ramadan/holy occasions that would enable them not to avoid telling brothers or fathers about being on the period.

It was apparent that creating excuses and instilling the need to be hyperaware of exposing menstruation to men, creates a culture where a women's responsibility in is in part, to 'protect' men from the reality of menstruation of which is tainted due to taboo. As stated by Sanday (1981:206) 'the "polluting nature" of menstruation is treated as justification for the separation and elevation of men in relation to women.' This may be attributed to the patriarchal society and the historic the superior decision-making powers of men (Mohan et al., 2015).

Research has reported that men learn little about menstruation. Peranovic and Bentley (2016) in study exploring men's attitudes, found that they often reported not being taught about periods and that what little knowledge was gained, saturated with negativity and taboo. For example, it has been shown how men may regard menstruation as being more damaging and degrading than women (Forbes et al. 2003).

Attitudes and lack of knowledge on part of men has significant impacts on the emotions of women, as seen in the transcript

***My boyfriend didn't know what a period was. I had to explain to him. Not only does he not understand, he doesn't know what to do. They don't get the cravings or emotion side. Its just added stress and It angers me. You need to accept it. As a women I go through this.***

**(Participant E, 271 - 275)**

***I feel like men in SA communities don't really realise or are educated on what a period is really like or like to experience it. If we talk about South Asia community where there really isn't education provided, they probably won't even know what a period is until their wife tells them. I feel like that's just really bad. When my period makes me feel bad, I want it be known and comforted (Participant C, 600 - 605)***

Participants expressed a definite need for more supportive male figures – particularly their partners. Allen and Goldberg (2009) found that young men who have little knowledge of sex, are more likely to regard menstruation as dirty. The fact that sex

within SA culture is taboo and parents refrain from talking about it with their children (Kopala and Keitel, 2016) may to an extent, explain men's ambivalence towards menstruation.

The women felt that men had a responsibility to be more nurturing and considerate of the effects and menstruating as oppose to benefiting from a culture where menstruating is seen as a women's problem only. This is contrary to Peranovic, and Bentley (2016) where it was reported how Caucasian men in relationships, reported being sympathetic to emotional and physical needs of their menstruating partners by providing hot water bottles etc. Lack of knowledge and what little of it being negative, consequently made the women feel angry and unsupportive.

## **Conclusion**

The research highlighted that within young, South Asian women of the diaspora, menstruation experience appeared to be saturated with negativity. The women felt obliged to follow strict protocols that enabled menses to be concealed as much as possible (such as wearing dark clothing and using dark bed sheets). Central to negative experience, was the role of the mother and negative societal attitudes. The

acculturation gap between the first generation mother and second generation daughter, meant the mother's own attitudes and beliefs regarding how to deal with menstruation was passed on and the daughters were obliged to follow this despite disagreement.

The transmission of menstrual taboo between mother and daughter, shed light in terms of future implications in that Taghva (2010) stated that by educating mothers to share appropriate knowledge with their daughters regarding puberty, daughter's attitudes towards puberty issues such as menstruation, can readily change.

Whilst the current study aimed to explore experience for South Asian women, the finding that menstrual experience was predominantly negative and that menstrual taboo was transmitted, cannot be readily generalised to all South Asian women. This is because the negative impacts of the acculturation gap may not be present in South Asian women of second generation daughters however in terms of future research, it would be interesting to explore whether this is the case. Research in relation to menstrual taboo within South Asian women, may have further benefit from a more homogenised sample where women from one religious background and culture, such as all Bangladeshi or all Pakistani were studied. Participants in the current research only being united by the fact that they were second generation and of South Descent, meant that attitudes and norms specific to a religious background were not considered.

## **Reflexivity**

Caelli (2001) stated that within phenomenological orientated research, the researcher should integrate reflexive analysis in order to clarify the way in which the research was seen through the lens of the researcher. This was of importance due to

my vested interest in the research. As a British South Asian Sikh woman and intersectional feminist interested in women's issues, I was always keen on exploring (within an academic sense), how menstruation taboo manifests and impacts on the lives of my fellow SA friends and exploring specific findings.

The Heideggerian perspective of bracketing (1962) intertwined well with the exploration of menstruation. This is where the researcher's beliefs and attitudes are not seen as biases to be eliminated, but necessary for sense making and interpretation (Heidegger, 1962). Having insight into menstrual taboo myself made me better informed in terms of guiding the interview. Within a friendship context, emotional and distressing stories can have a profound emotional impact on the researcher (Brackenridge and Gloucestershire (1999). This was certainly the case for myself. During the interviews, I had to compose a sense of anger in hearing the degree of hostility towards my menstruating friends. I refrained knowing that this may have manifested itself through misleading questions



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